WASHTENAW IMPRESSIONS

Records of Meetings of the Washtenaw Historical Society

1944, No. 3

Contents

The Washtenaw Historical Society, by Carl E. Guthe
The Detroit Historical Society and Museum, by Robert H. Larson

THE WASHTENAW HISTORICAL SOCIETY

By Dr. Carl E. Guthe*
At time of meeting, Director of the University of Michigan Museums
At time of publication, Director of the New York State Museum

Because the Washtenaw Historical Society is recognized as the only community agency charged with the custodianship of the community's memory, through tangible records and written words, it is faced with a great and unique responsibility. It must create in the minds of the individuals who constitute the present society of the Washtenaw region an appreciation of the lessons which past experiences may teach in contributing to the solutions of current social and economic problems. This is what the Society has to give. Let us see how this responsibility is related to the problems which confront the community today.

In this war period we are all concerned both directly and indirectly with the radical changes which are occurring in our daily life. There are broken families, due to the absence of some of our citizens in the armed forces. There are unstable working conditions, due in part to the development of war industries and in part to changing consumer demands. New and complex methods of distribution of food and household needs require our citizens to alter their concepts of retail merchandizing. Restricted supplies of materials are affecting our community services. The rapid increase of population in the area presents complex social and economic situations. We look ahead to the post-war period, with new and complicated conditions possibly involving unemployment, reorientation of industry, and unaccustomed social adjustments.

These are the community problems with which the present citizens of Washtenaw County are now concerned. They are the most serious problems many individuals have encountered within their own lifetime.

---

*Dr. Guthe was the first president of the Washtenaw Historical Society from its reorganization in 1929 to 1934, and since then has served on the Board of Directors.

However, to the Washtenaw region itself they are not new problems, but merely old problems of adjustment dressed up in new conditions. During the 19th century, the Washtenaw region lived through and solved similar periods of community adjustment during the wars and depressions of the past. It is the responsibility of the Washtenaw Historical Society to bring to the community greater assurance and more confidence in itself by demonstrating, through the community's own memory, the fundamental characteristics of the problems it is now facing, and the aid it may gain by studying the way in which similar problems have been solved in former years.

Nevertheless, we are faced with a very practical question of the means by which the Society may adequately perform its proper function. Let us proceed from the more generalized theme to specific ones. The action taken tonight, in increasing the dues of the Society, is a step in the right direction. We are all so conditioned that we are inclined to expect to receive service in proportion to the amount we pay for that service. Therefore, dues of fifty cents for membership in the Society implies that the Society has little to give the individual member. By doubling these dues we thereby serve notice that we believe we have more to give each member and correspondingly each member will expect greater returns from the Society. Another means of creating interest in the organization has already been inaugurated and should be expanded. I refer to the distribution to the membership of mimeographed reports at regular intervals, such as the manuscripts or digests of addresses given at meetings, in the serial titled "Washtenaw Impressions." These reports serve two purposes: they arouse interest in the historical work of the Society, and they remind the members at regular intervals that a society does exist which is charged with maintaining the community memory. A third means of strengthening the Society's part in the community is by a series of definite projects on the part of the organization. One such project consists of regular program meetings, using a single theme for all of the papers presented during one year. A number of reports upon various aspects of a single theme presents a continuity which is completely lacking when meetings deal with separate and unrelated topics.

We would all agree that the greatest single need of the Washtenaw Historical Society is a means of demonstrating to the citizens of the community the value of the tangible materials which constitute the collections of the Society. We have all been dreaming of an adequate and dignified home for the organization in which these collections could be displayed properly and interestingly. Although several times we have been almost at the point of securing what we wanted, our goal has never quite been achieved. I suggest that, instead of waiting until the organization can attain the goal it has set itself, we should take a practical step forward, even if it does not at the moment approximate our objective. Our first responsibility is to acquaint the citizens of the community with our potential contribution to their lives. It would be better to rent a down-town empty store and install temporary exhibits for this purpose, than to keep our assets hidden in storage until they can be

displayed with full effect. By making the collection available to citizens of the community for examination and study, even in a temporary form, it should be possible to increase interest, augment our membership, and make friends with more individuals who feel that the support of the community memory is just the type of public service they wish to render the Washtenaw region. Them, as the Society grows by means of this temporary and admittedly inadequate demonstration of its usefulness, it should have the strength at an earlier date to support the type of home which its leaders have envisioned for a number of years.

As is true of any community, the Washtenaw region possesses as citizens today descendants of many families who have been here for a number of generations. All of you can think of the names of these families which are found throughout the industrial, mercantile, and social activities of the community. The memories of these families, going back three and four generations, are segments of the community memory. Surely there must be some way in which the present members of these families can be persuaded that the traditions within their own family groups are a part of the story of the community, that they as modern representatives of their ancestors have a responsibility to the community, and that the degree to which they discharge that responsibility constitutes a tribute to their fathers and their grandfathers. Once this attitude is awakened in a few individuals, the concept will spread rapidly, with the result that the Society will profit by the continuity of life within the community through these older families.

Just as the community today is the result of the activities of many families of several generations, so also is it the result of the growth of industrial organizations and commercial units within the region. What is the story of the Peninsular Paper Company in Ypsilanti, of the Hoover Steel Ball, or of International Industries? What contributions have been made to the community through the generations of life of Eberbach's, of the Sauer Lumber Company, of Fischer's Hardware? Each of these business firms and others like them have participated in making the Washtenaw community what it is today. By supporting and cooperating with the Washtenaw Historical Society, each of these firms will be able to incorporate its own experience into the composite memory of the community, and thereby identify itself more firmly than before with the Washtenaw region. Such action should lead to favorable publicity and to increased goodwill. From a business standpoint, the support of the objectives of our Society by these firms is just good common sense.

Similarly, a large group of civic and social organizations have contributed their share to the life of the Washtenaw community. Among these are the churches, the Grange, the chambers of commerce, the YMCA and YWCA, the fraternal organizations, the women's clubs, the luncheon clubs, and similar groups. The majority of these have as at least one objective that of stimulating pride in the Washtenaw region. Surely it should not be difficult to convince each of them that a record of their own history in the files of the historical

society identifies each more closely with the community, and that by supporting the objectives of the Society each is actually taking a step toward its own goals.

I submit that an organized campaign on the part of the Washtenaw Historical Society, based upon the conviction that the Society has an important service to offer the community, and directed to these various community activities which have just been listed, will greatly increase the membership of the Society, strengthen public support and interest, and facilitate the raising of sufficient funds to establish the Society upon a sound economic basis. However, this process is not an end in itself. Through the cooperation of these various elements, the already substantial assets in the form of materials and records of the Society will be increased. Yet this alone is not enough. These assets must be used, and the only way in which they can be used satisfactorily is to present them to the community, that is, the public, in a way which will demonstrate their value in understanding and dealing with current problems. The analysis and interpretation of these assets in terms of their relation to present unemployment conditions, material supplies, wholesale and retail prices, housing facilities, and community services, will require time and effort on the part of civic-minded volunteers among the members of the Society.

The preservation of these records of the experiences of the Washtenaw community since its origin is of course one important function of the Society. Yet our organization will neither perform its full service to the community nor demonstrate its practical value to the citizens until it has bridged the gap between the experiences of the past and the problems of the present for the community, in the same sense that an individual is not a satisfactory citizen until he is able to use the lessons taught by past experiences in meeting current conditions.

In final analysis, the Washtenaw Historical Society will be able to exist as a community enterprise only if it has sufficient funds to meet its obligations. These obligations consist of securing adequate quarters for the preservation of its collections, facilities for the display of these materials, and a sufficient staff to care for the properties of the Society and to direct its community activities. An annual income of at least $5000 is necessary to meet these obligations. With membership dues at $1 a year, this means that the Society should have a membership of at least 5000, a not impossible figure considering the population of the Washtenaw region.

The first step in establishing a program for raising funds would be to secure the support of responsible officials of such organizations as the Chamber of Commerce, the Junior Chamber of Commerce, the women's clubs, the banks, the trust companies, and the civic organizations. It ought even to be possible to stir sufficient enthusiasm so that the program could be underwritten in advance of the drive itself.

At various times the suggestion has been made that the assets of the Society and its general guidance should be assumed by the University of Michigan. During the past several years a number of staff members of the University have aided the Society in various ways, not because they were University of Michigan employees, but because they were citizens of the Washtenaw region. Unofficially various facilities at the University have been placed at the disposal of the Society, and a portion of its collections is still in University buildings. However, if the University were to assume responsibility for the work of the Society, then this organization would become a part of the University of Michigan, and would thereby lose its individuality as a service organization to the community. While the University is, of course, a part of the Washtenaw community, many of its objectives are also national in character. On the other hand, the Washtenaw Historical Society is and should be an integral part of the Washtenaw community. If it is to render the service it should, then it has a right to expect the support of the citizens of the entire region. They should take pride in such support and not seek to avoid some of its responsibilities by proposing affiliation with the University.

Ann Arbor, Michigan
December 20, 1943

THE DETROIT HISTORICAL SOCIETY AND MUSEUM

By Robert H. Larson
Director

Inasmuch as Mr. George W. Stark, President of our Society, addressed the Washtenaw Historical Society only last year and at that time told you of the situation in Detroit, it would be well for me to confine my talk to developments since that time. It is difficult, however, to get the complete picture without going back a few years, in fact to the beginning of Detroit as a cultural center.

There must have been several historical societies in this community long before our present Society came into being. It would be difficult to believe that Governor Lewis Cass could long live in Detroit or any community without taking steps to form a group into an historical society. So we can be assured that one existed in his day. Some years later the New England Society was formed, about 1845 or a little later. The members were those persons interested in recalling their heritage in New England, and such men as Cass, Chandler, Stocking, and others contributed much to the stimulation of the study of history. This organization, splendid in its contribution, was short-lived, although an attempt was made many years later to revive it. We know of no attempt to collect historic materials and it is not likely that a museum ever existed.

The Detroit Historical Society was organized in January of 1922, but the first meeting had been held at a private home the previous month. There were present at the first meeting eleven men, among whom were Mr. Clarence M. Burton, Mr. Albert H. Finn, Mr. Divie Duffield, and men of that character, whose interest in history and good reading has made possible not only an historical society but great advances in the libraries and schools. Their purpose was to supplement the work of the Burton Historical Collection, which had then only recently been donated to the City of Detroit. Mr. Burton felt that it would provide an avenue for directing materials of historic value toward the Collection, that people would be stimulated to collect and read and would thus desire to know more of their own city. These men then outlined the scope of the effort, and before long decided to incorporate and hold regular monthly meetings for discussion and general cultural advancement. Within a short time the number of members had increased and in a year or two they had over a hundred. Recently an analysis of the present membership was made and it revealed a striking fact. Of our present membership, seventeen have been members since this beginning, and we must remember that the larger number then members were persons beyond middle age.

And so it is apparent they built well and on good foundations. Materials began to flow toward the Collection, and by 1928 it was apparent that a place should be provided for the storing or display of such articles as would properly be considered museum pieces. It

was decided at an early date to separate library materials from museum materials, but the latter were merely placed in storage without a definite thought for a museum. When in 1928 a Museum was started, the first pieces accepted and recorded were sections of water main from Detroit's water system. These pipes were made of wood and are still on display in our Museum. Then followed portraits of the founders of the Old Detroit Light Guard, and in rapid succession family heirlooms and a great many other portraits. Mr. Arthur S. Hampton was selected to care for the Museum and he remained with it until his death in February of 1943. At the present time there are more than 11,000 items on display on the 23rd floor of the Barlum Tower and in storage there and elsewhere.

The records of the Society indicate that there had been much talk about acquiring a home for the Society and its Museum. The Du Charme house on East Jefferson was under consideration, but it would hardly have been able to bear the heavy burden of the collections, and was passed over. The beautiful French chateau owned by the Hecker family located just north of the Art Institute had been suggested, but the necessary funds were not available for its purchase. At one time it was thought that Mr. Burton's home on Brady Avenue would be suitable, but it too was passed over for some reason not now apparent. The need for a home has been a dream for many years.

During the days of the WPA, additional assistance was obtained in classifying and recording for the Society's Museum, and from this group came one person who succeeded Mr. Hampton as curator. She is at present the only other full-time staff member besides the Director. During 1943 it was decided to plan for a permanent home and to enlarge the program so as to make the work much more effective. The Detroit News, as you were told last year, sent Mr. Stark on a tour of all the larger museums in the mid-west and some in the East. He came back with a vision of what should be done and outlined for the Trustees his proposal and in it included the idea of employing a director. The City of Detroit provided the means, and as a result I was selected to assume responsibility for this larger program. Just how Mrs. Charles B. Pike of Chicago came into the picture is not public information. It is no doubt true that the efforts of Mr. Stark were a large factor in this new situation, but Mr. Stark will not say how much.

As a final result of the discussions with her, she offered the Society a gift of $50,000 provided the Society would raise otherwise the sum of $200,000. The Society then set out to do this, in the meantime offering their entire collection of relics to Wayne University provided they would house it on the campus, which they agreed to do. They have set aside a building at 447 Merrick Avenue, near Cass Avenue, in Detroit, for our temporary home, and we expect ultimately to raise the funds to build a permanent building on or near that site from the gift of Mrs. Pike. During the next fiscal year Wayne University will handle our City of Detroit allowance and in addition give us quarters and perhaps some staff assistance.

There has been in the past year a phenomenal growth in our membership due to personal solicitation. As this is written we have 343 paid members and the number is increasing from day to day. Since January 1, 1943, the number has increased from 232 to 343. The number of visitors to our Museum during 1943 increased by almost twenty percent. Special exhibits attracted large numbers although our old "stand-bys" continued to bring visitors. Some changes were made in the arrangement but we are biding our time until we get into the new house. On November 12 our Society sponsored a meeting of historic bodies, to which were invited several hundred persons interested in our work. At that meeting the plans for a new museum were made known to the general public and the response indicated that Detroit is unquestionably alive to its own history provided the subject is presented in an effective way.

Ann Arbor, Michigan
January 17, 1944